

FEATURE

Hare paenga: the canoe-shaped houses and monumental archaeology of Rapa Nui (Easter Island)

The archaeology of Rapa Nui is dominated by the Easter Island heads, but these were just one element of larger ceremonial complexes. Colin Richards explores some distinctive houses, which offer tantalising clues for understanding the celebrated statues.



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Forming the eastern tip of Polynesia is the small and isolated island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island). Although famous for its extraordinary statues (*moai*) that once stood on ceremonial platforms (*ahu*), there is a wealth of associated but less well-known archaeological sites and monuments. As seen in CWA 104, the spectacular ruined *ahu* complex at Akahanga, with its fallen *moai* and topknots (*pukao*) is situated on the south coast of Rapa Nui. With the roar of the Pacific Ocean in our ears, if we walked inland, within a hundred metres or so the foundations of a number of houses (*hare paenga*) would become visible poking through the low grass. These take the form of a series of shaped black basalt blocks (*paenga*) set end-to-end to form a boat-shaped house foundation. The blocks were well-bedded in the ground and each has a series of circular holes cut into the upper surface. During house construction, thin c.2m lengths of wood were pushed into each hole and, at the top, pulled together and lashed to a ridge-pole to form a keel-like roof. This would create an unusual house shape reminiscent of the hull of an upturned canoe. Outside the front of the house, a semicircle of water-worn stones (*poro*) provided a platform area.



Ahu Akahanga lies adjacent to a small inlet on the south coast of Rapa Nui. It comprises a number of discrete platforms and associated fallen *moai*, which demonstrate a long and ongoing process of construction. Upslope are grouped a number of the houses known as *hare paenga*. What can these structures reveal about the beliefs of the people who built them? PHOTO: Adam Stanford.

Houses of this form are restricted to Rapa Nui and not present on other Polynesian islands. In order to explore this exceptional architecture further, it is necessary to move away from the houses themselves and consider two things: first, the way in which Rapa Nui was initially colonised, and, second, the beliefs of the early settlers. By this means we will see the *hare paenga* is much more than a dwelling replicating the imagery of an upturned canoe, but through the use of particular materials this architecture expressed a model of the cosmos that had a substantial affect on those who encountered it.



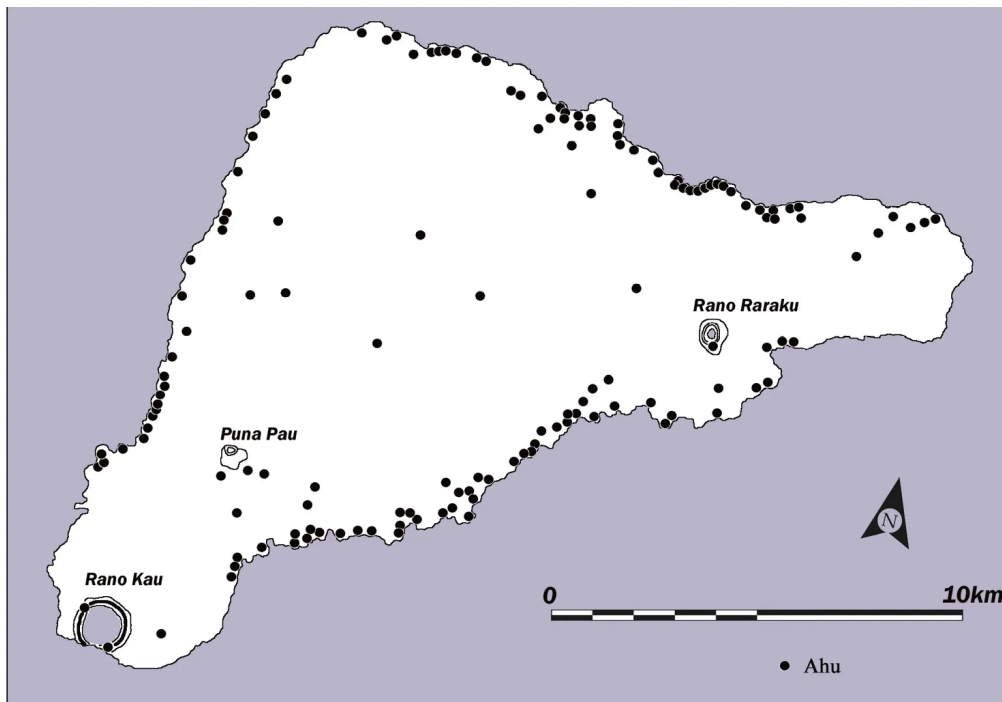
Hare paenga at Akahanga: these canoe-shaped houses can be identified by the long black basalt slabs with circular holes carved into their tops, and the semicircle of *poro* water-worn stones that provides a platform outside the door. PHOTO: Adam Stanford

The voyagers

In the book *On the Road of the Winds*, Patrick Kirch suggests ‘the history of the Pacific is more than anything a history of voyages, and all that word entails: curiosity, courage, skill, technique, stamina, doubt, hope and more’. Through a series of extraordinary voyages, ancient Polynesians sailed mainly eastwards encountering and settling islands as they went. This was a truly remarkable feat because the vast Pacific Ocean can be as treacherous and dangerous as it is beautiful. Originally, because of the massive distances traversed, this was believed to have taken almost a millennium to achieve, but is now considered to have occurred within c.300 years from c.AD 900-1200, and possibly even less. This was the great age of Polynesian expansion and the time of the voyaging canoe. From a variety of sources, we know that canoes were not merely functional sea-craft, but vessels of sacred character. From the rituals

surrounding their construction to the launching ceremonies, canoes attained special significance, and we can be sure that this was enhanced in the case of voyaging canoes.

Of course, dating the initial colonisation of an island is fraught with difficulties, but at some time in the century between AD 1100 and 1200, voyagers stepped ashore on the very small and isolated island of Rapa Nui. At the time of landing, the island was very different from the denuded landscape of today. While being dominated by the three extinct volcanic cones that give the island its triangular shape, lush vegetation including swaying palms would have been present running down almost to the water's edge. However, to appreciate the way in which these settlers would come to build some of the most spectacular monuments in eastern Polynesia, it is important to recognise that it was not merely the vegetation that was different from today, but also that the people themselves understood the world in a very different manner – and their place within it.



Numerous *ahu* were constructed around the Rapa Nui coastline, almost wrapping the island. Many of those with standing *moai* were positioned in small bays and inlets, which are ideal places for launching canoes. IMAGE: after Martinsson Wallen 1994.

While there is no firm evidence whence the first settlers of Rapa Nui set sail, it was likely to have been from somewhere in the Society or Tuamotu Islands, or possibly the closer Mangareva or Pitcairn. However, in terms of belief systems, this easterly movement across the Pacific continued an ancestral movement that began when the first ancestors left the shores of the mythical island of Hawaiki (known as ‘Hiva’ on Rapa Nui), situated somewhere in the distant west. This was the Polynesian homeland from which the first ancestors ventured forth and the place to which the spirits returned on death. In this respect, Hawaiki shared an affinity with something known to the Polynesians as the realm of Po. This can be described as a sacred netherworld, a place of otherness, darkness and night-time, yet of potency and the beginning of things. Its opposite can be found in Ao, which concerns the everyday encountered physical world of people and social relationships. Of course, this is a simplification of

a complex cosmological system, but it will suffice here. An important point to take from this is that the voyaging that led to the colonisation of the eastern Pacific would have been as much about perpetuating and recreating ancestral voyages as obtaining access to new lands. Equally, the sea acted as a conduit or ‘road’ back to Hawaiki, and on the western coasts of many Polynesian islands there is a ‘jumping off’ point for the spirits of the dead to enter the sea and return to Hawaiki and the realm of Po. This has relevance when we come to consider the canoe-shaped houses of Rapa Nui.



In O'ahu, Hawai'i, the traditional jumping-off place for the dead to return to Hawaiki is the spectacular Keana Point. PHOTO: Colin Richards.

It would appear that from the earliest time the newly arrived settlers embarked on building monuments, creating sacred spaces, and carving and dressing stone images or statue moai. Initially, the *moai* were fairly small (up to c.2m in height), and were carved out of volcanic rocks of different types (and colours) – for example, bright red scoria, black basalt, olive volcanic tuff, and white trachyte. They were probably set on small

stone platforms (*ahu*), which are known as *marae* in other parts of east Polynesia.

Within a hundred years or so, there occurred an expansion in monument construction, with bigger and more elaborate *ahu* being built and larger *moai* being erected in greater numbers. At this time, virtually all the *moai* were now made from volcanic tuff, which was derived from a single source: the great quarry of Rano Raraku, situated in the south-east of Rapa Nui. Rano Raraku is a large volcanic cone that rises steeply from a flat plain. The outer and inner south-eastern slopes of the extinct volcano are sculpted by numerous recessed quarry bays that produced hundreds of beautifully carved *moai*, many of these were subsequently transported to the numerous *ahu* platforms situated around the coast of the island. This was accompanied by the quarrying at Puna Pau, in the west of the island, of large cylinders of red scoria known as *pukao*, which were placed on the heads of the *moai* and sometimes likened to hats.



This small white trachyte moai is situated on the northern slopes of Poike, a large extinct volcanic cone that forms the eastern corner of Rapa Nui. PHOTO: Colin Richards.



The extraordinary *moai* quarry of Rano Raraku rises out of a flat plain and is carved with *moai* quarry bays. PHOTO: Colin Richards.

Crossing boundaries

It was an investigation of the complexities of monumental construction, considered to be as much a social process as an exercise in the deployment of new

technologies, that brought a team of researchers from Britain (University College London, University of the Highlands and Islands, Bournemouth University, University of Manchester), and Hawai'i (Hawai'i Pacific University) to Rapa Nui. The project – entitled Rapa Nui: landscapes of construction – began in 2007 and ran over an eight-year period. Apart from the quarries, our attention focused on the many *ahu*, especially those with fallen *moai* (all the standing *moai* on *ahu* have been re-erected). It soon became clear that monumentality in ancient Rapa Nui, particularly *ahu* construction, was very much an ongoing process, with building work extending over several hundred years. There were a number of interesting features at different *ahu* complexes that raised our curiosity. For example, at *ahu* Tahai, on the western coast, a monumental canoe ramp is central to the complex being flanked by platforms and *moai* gazing inland. Similarly, the massive *ahu* Akahanga together with *ahu* Ura Uranga te Mahina flanks a small inlet with a canoe ramp.



As part of the Rapa Nui: landscapes of construction project, excavations at Puna Pau revealed the methods employed in cutting the red scoria cylinders (*pukao*) from the living rock. Abandoned *pukao* can be seen lying on the floor of the volcanic cone. PHOTO: Adam Stanford.

This is a common landscape characteristic where *ahu* platforms with moai are built at potential canoe-launching sites. In assuming this location, the *ahu* and moai sit at the interface between land and sea, and by virtue of gazing inland, watch over those who ventured to sea and transgressed that boundary. Of course, launching canoes at the *ahu* would have been restricted to formal or special occasions, as being in the sea is intrinsic to Polynesian life, both in the past and today.

One element of a number of these *ahu* complexes that caught our attention was the inland grouping of the canoe-shaped houses: *hare paenga*. These distinctive houses, which tend to be c.12-16m in length, appear to be contemporary with the *ahu* platforms. Given their proximity to – and association with – *ahu*, they have been described as high-status dwellings for both priests and chiefs. However, in some instances these structures were huge, measuring up to c.90-100m in length and 3m

in width. These are known as *hare nui* and are thought to have acted as meeting houses. Their foundation *paenga* stones were equally enormous, being up to 3.5m in length.



Pukao were placed on the heads of the *maoi* at a number of coastal ahu, as seen here on the reconstructed ahu Nau Nau at Anakena bay in the north of the island. PHOTO: Colin Richards.

The doorways of the early hare paenga faced the raised *ahu* platforms and were therefore also orientated towards the sea. At this point, it is worth considering the various features and components of these houses as they affected the experiences of those entering them.

Approaching the entrance of the *hare paenga* would involve walking across the paved area of *poro*. It will be remembered that *poro* are small rounded boulders, and their shape and condition is due to their being rolled in the water of the shoreline by the pounding surf (Rapa Nui has no surrounding reef). So, in this respect, they are a material that is found at the interface of land and sea, in effect marking a transitional zone. This is precisely the role they perform within the architecture of

the *hare paenga*, where elements of the island world are used as a resource to create allied but different affects in built architecture.



The canoe ramp at *ahu* Tahai is a central component of the complex. A canoe being launched there would pass between the ever-watchful *moai*. PHOTO: Colin Richards.



Some massive *hare nui* are still visible today, as at *ahu* Te Pau, on the west coast of the island. These buildings can be up to 100m in length. PHOTO: Adam Stanford.

Once the *poro* platform has been crossed, access into the

hare paenga is through a short tunnel-like doorway. If we look closely at the 1872 drawing by Pierre Loti of 'a chief's house', something rather interesting is present in the form of two small *moai*-like statues positioned either side of the doorway. In the *Diary of a Cadet on the Warship 'La Flore'*, translated by Ann M Altman, Loti describes entry into a *hare paenga* on 4 January 1872:

We stop in front of one of the many thatched dwellings that are flattened among the rocks and the sand, where they resemble the backs of sleeping animals. My escorts invite me to go inside and I have to get down on my hands and knees, wriggling like a cat going through a cat-door, because the entrance, at ground level and guarded by two granite divinities with sinister expressions, is a round hole that is barely two feet high.

Entry into the *hare paenga* involved passing between the diminutive *moai* to gain access to the interior. This resonates with the formal or ceremonial passage of people from land to sea undertaken down a canoe ramp at one of the *ahu* complexes under the watchful eyes of the *moai*. It should also be recalled that the sea acts as a conduit to Hawaiki and the sacred realm of Po.



Illustration of a 'chief's house', showing diminutive *moai* flanking the doorway, drawn by Pierre Loti in 1872. Many diminutive *moai* were collected and removed from the island. IMAGES: after Heyerdahl 1961, © Fonds Daniel Hervé, Maison de Pierre Loti, Rochefort.



This example in the Father Sebastian Englert Anthropological Museum, Rapa Nui, is likely to have flanked a *hare paenga* doorway. PHOTO: Mike Seager Thomas.

At the *hare paenga*, it is worth mentioning that the majority of daily tasks are undertaken outside in the sunlight (the domain of Ao). Therefore, the dark interior of the *hare paenga* is a place to sleep, and sleep is a time when people semi-enter the realm of Po. Equally, the

architecture of the house is that of the canoe, and the canoe is the vehicle of passage in which the ancestors left Hawaiki on voyages of discovery ending in the colonisation of Polynesia. In the *hare paenga*, architecture and materials fuse to provide the appropriate ingredients to enable safe and successful entry and transition from one domain to another.

Passage to Po

If the *hare paenga* associated with the *ahu* were houses for the priests and chiefs, then the potency of the materials and architecture of the house is increased, since these were people who were considered to be closer to the ancestral deities. In this brief account, we have seen how entry into the house involves not merely going ‘indoors’ but a passage from the daylight (Ao) to the darkness (Po). The control of this transition was obviously of great concern to the inhabitants of ancient Rapa Nui in all aspects of their lives. This is so well demonstrated by the linkage between similar acts of passage between realms occurring at the *hare paenga* and the *ahu*. At both sites, the passage is from the everyday to the ‘sacred’ and, in both instances, it is undertaken under the watchful gaze of the *moai*, because such passage involves entering the domain of Po and, in doing so, coming into closer proximity to the ancestors, an undertaking that was not without consequence or danger.

FURTHER READING

S Hamilton and C Richards (2016) ‘Between

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